VIRGIL THOMSON: MUSIC CRITIC

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER I. THE PROBLEM AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS	1
Statement of the Problem	1
Importance and Need for the Study	1
Sources and Materials	2
Purpose and Plan of the Study	3
CHAPTER II. A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE MAN	5
CHAPTER III. THE ART OF JUDGING MUSIC	17
CHAPTER IV. THE CRITIC SPEAKS	41
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION	52
APPENDIX. LIST OF WORKS BY VIRGIL THOMSON	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY	61
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	64

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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The purpose of this thesis is to (1) present a comprehensive view of the American composer, Virgil Thomson, as a man, an educator, and, primarily, as a leading music critic; (2) discuss and evaluate the musical criticism of Virgil Thomson; and (3) suggest Thomson's role in the musical criticism of the twentieth century.

The theoretical plan used to achieve the above has the following format:

1. A biographical sketch of Virgil Thomson in order to present to the reader the credentials and conditions which led to his appointment as Head Music Critic of the New York Herald-Tribune.
2. A discussion of Virgil Thomson, the critic, as evaluated through his books and reviews.

3. A section where the critic speaks, highlighting Thomson's positions and pronouncements on the musical arts as expressed in his writings.
4. A final section in which the present writer proposes the possible influence of Virgil Thomson on American music criticism.

The conclusions reached through this study showed that Virgil Thomson left no stone unturned among the musical bastions of our society. Through the critic's formal training and musical background, his reviews alerted the public to the latest musical trends, informed his readers of compositional flaws and strengths, supplied historical information, and rendered insights into a composer's world. The study indicated that Thomson, as a composer and critic, advocated the establishment and advancement of an American musical culture. It also suggested that his music criticism touched deeply the qualities of the American culture and, therefore, should not be neglected in a study of Western music.

David A. Kushner
Chairman

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

Statement of the Problem

This study will (1) present a comprehensive view of the American composer, Virgil Thomson, as a man, an educator, and, primarily, as a leading music critic; (2) discuss and evaluate the musical critisism of Virgil Thomson; and (3) suggest Thomson's role in the musical criticism of the twentieth century.

Importance and Need for the Study

Virgil Thomson is America's oldest living composer. Aside from that, he was, for fourteen years, a leading music critic employed by the New York Herald-Tribune. Little has been written on his criticism, other than a few sentences in a reference book or biographical sketch. Thomson, whose activities encompassed composing, conducting, and performing (organ and piano) presented a unique challenge in his role as a music critic. Why has his music criticism remained in the shadows of his career? After all, he had an exceptional musical background for a daily newspaper critic. Is his criticism worthy of such neglect? This aspect of his multi-phased career beckoned to be explained. The present writer

felt this area needed elucidation and, hence, was worthy of investigation.

Sources and Materials

The standard dictionaries, encyclopedias, journals and magazines were consulted. These revealed minimal treatment of Virgil Thomson's career as a music critic. The Harvard Symposium[1] was carefully studied and proved most useful, however, for an understanding of the state of music criticism in the first half of the twentieth century. This source with its inclusion of Virgil Thomson's article "Art of Judging Music," and a graduate course in music criticism taught by Dr. David Z. Kushner[2] prompted this present study. Other major references surveyed included Thomson's books on his music reviews, his biography and auto-biography (see Bibliography). In addition, the back files of the New York Herald-Tribune were examined.[3] From this material many

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[1]Music and Criticism: A Symposium, edited by Richard F. French (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948) contains papers read at a symposium on music criticism held at Harvard University in May, 1947. Included are introductory remarks by Archibald T. Davidson, and papers by Virgil Thomson, Roger Sessions, E.M. Forster, Edgar Wind, Olga Samaroff, Paul Henry Lang, Otto Kinkeldey, and Huntington Cairns.

[2]Professor of Music, University of Florida, course no. MUS 5665--Music Criticism.

[3]The present writer travelled to the nearest library which had the complete files of the NYHT on microfilm--the University of South Carolina Library located in Columbia, South Carolina (only a few libraries in the country have the entire collection).

of the conclusions reached in this thesis were drawn. The conclusions herein were also based in part upon a meeting with Virgil Thomson and personally talking with him about music criticism. These encounters enabled the writer to place into perspective the salient characteristics that shaped both Thomson's life to date and his music reviews.

Purpose and Plan of the Study

The enigma of Virgil Thomson as a man, an educator and music critic presented to this writer the challenge needed to undertake such a study. It seemed an oddity that so little was written on his career as a professional critic, especially since the man has led a rather public life in the various phases of his musical career. This author was curious as to Thomson's approach to writing reviews in light of his thorough training as a musician. Similar concerns were addressed through this study.

This thesis has the following format:

1. A biographical sketch of Virgil Thomson in order to present to the reader the credentials and conditions which led to his appointment as Head Music Critic of the New York Herald-Tribune.

2. A discussion of Virgil Thomson, the critic, as evaluated through his books and reviews.

3. A section where the critic speaks, highlighting Thomson's positions and pronouncements on the musical arts as expressed in his writings.

4. A final section in which the author proposes the possible influence of Virgil Thomson on American music criticism.

It is hoped that this study has emerged as more than a thesis requirement, and that it has helped to shed light upon one aspect of Virgil Thomson's role in American arts, that of music critic.

CHAPTER II

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE MAN

Virgil Garnett Thomson was born in Kansas City, Missouri on November 25, 1896, to Quincy Alfred and Clara May Gaines. His only other sibling was a sister, Ruby, eleven years older. The senior Thomson was a family man. His civil service job for the postal system afforded him his own home and time for his hobby, gardening. His wife, true to the times, stayed home and cared for the children; however, their home was often filled with people of varying ages because Clara May Thomson enjoyed entertaining. The boy learned quickly the art of social amenities. He was often the focus of attention during the family's evening gatherings--reading out loud, playing piano or dancing.

Ruby purchased a piano for Virgil to practice on when he was just a youngster. Lela Garnett, a cousin, gave the boy his first piano lessons at age five. She taught him how to read from notes. Until that time, the lad had only improvised loudly with his flatted hands and arms on the keys, always with the pedal down! Thomson's first piano pieces were described by his parents as "banging;" the young composer had them named after current events like the

"Chicago Fire."[1] By age twelve the youth was occasionally playing piano at the local movie house and performing recitals in the schools and churches.

His formal lessons began with local teachers. They included, in piano, Geneve Lichtenwalter, and in theory, Gustave Schoettle. Thomson studied organ from 1909-1917, and again in 1919 with Clarence Sears. A tenor soloist with the Calvary Baptist church, Robert Leigh Murray, became the young man's music mentor, providing the budding musician with people who could instruct him properly. Thomson rehearsed with Murray two nights a week for six years and accompanied him (for pay) on many occasions. Murray also took the youth to Chicago, where he had the opportunity to hear Mary Garden sing. His mentor had already introduced him to opera, and this experience only heightened his interest in the voice.

Virgil Thomson was raised in a strict Southern Baptist household. At the age of fourteen, he sang in an Episcopal choir and sometimes played organ; his father, however, insisted he still attend the family church beforehand. As a composer, Thomson has shown the influence of his church affiliation. His Symphony on a Hymn Tune is just one example

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[1]Virgil Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1966), p. 11. Further reference was made on a PBS Television Special on Thomson televised December 27, 1980, Gainesville, Florida.

of religious influence (see Appendix for list of works). The composer said this about religion:

> Churches are not my home. In the choir room or in the organ loft I earn my fee, but I cannot be a customer; this was always so, is still so. It has nothing to do with the fact that a major part of my music has been either composed for liturgical use or inspired by hymnody.[2]

In 1979 he stated that he loves religious music, "but never took to religion."[3] The fact remains that many of his works literally quote Protestant hymns [e.g., Variations and Fugues on Sunday School Tunes for organ).

As a child, Thomson was an avid reader and a straight A student. He read mostly fiction, theater magazines and reviews. In high school, through his association with Murray's friends, the youth was introduced to the subjects of philosophy, Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche in particular, and, as mentioned earlier, opera. Thomson grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in a mid-sized middle western ctiy. He recalled, "we lived in a small-town life centered on school and church, with lots of play and reading life thrown in."[4] The lad's parents took a tacit approach to his upbringing. At age fourteen, the young man announced there was no need of their discussing his vocation because

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[2]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, p. 20.

[3]PBS Television Special, p. 6 n.

[4]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, p. 16.

he knew it was to be music. Music was his life then and it always would be. "Culturally, Virgil brought up himself."[5]

For the most part, Thomson was a product of the Kansas City schools. He credited his writing ability to Miss Ellen Fox, a grammar teacher he had in high school. She taught him that it was possible to make both sense and to use correct grammar.

His first endeavor at writing, a short story, was published in the high school paper. He was denounced for plagiarism by the end of the week. Pressed for a topic and unable to create one, the future critic borrowed a theme he had read in a magazine. He did not copy any lines, just the plot. After a formal apology in the next month's issue by the editor, the incident was never again mentioned, but Thomson was not elected to any clubs the following year. At the end of his fourth year, he joined a group and petitioned for an advanced class in composition. Thomson said of his lesson, "The truth is, and I learned it from these experiences, that I have no gift for imaginative writing. I can describe things and persons, and narrate facts."[6]

Between 1915-1917, the young man attended a Junior College which had been newly established in Kansas City.

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[5]Kathleen O. Hoover and John Cage, Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music (New York: Sagamore Press, Inc., 1959), p. 16.

[6]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, p. 24.

Thomson started his own club, the Pansophists, and a college magazine, Pans. As editor, he modelled the publication after writers he admired, viz. Carl Sandburg, Bernard Shaw, and Henry Louis Mencken. During these years, the student also utilized his family's hospitable style of fostering conversation, in order "to create and sustain a symposium of the arts"[7] with company of mixed ages.

The student's college education was interrupted with the onset of World War I. He enlisted in the National Guard and in the U.S. Military Aviation Corps. Thomson never became a pilot nor did he travel overseas. The war ended before his orders were processed. The enlisted man did learn radio telephony at Columbia University and spent time in Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana. This experience proved valuable in later life when writing two of his film scores. One, The Louisiana Story, received a Pulitzer Prize (the first for a film score) in 1948.

In January of 1919, the discharged soldier returned to the Kansas City Junior College aware that his calling was in the East. Securing a loan from a fund to train Mormon teachers, administered by Dr. Fredrick Smith, a descendant of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Virgil Thomson set out for Harvard University in the fall of 1919.

With natural self-confidence, the student was prepared for Boston. Thomson entered Harvard with a church organ

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[7]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, p. 30.

job, an assistant-instructorship, scholarship money and the loan from Dr. Smith. Incidentally, the loan was not paid back until twenty years later. The Harvard man's original career goals included becoming a successful choir director and organist in a fairly lucrative church (his practicality showing) and, secondly, a composer. Those goals changed a few years later.

The initial courses included advanced English composition, philosophy, Italian and German. He studied French with a private tutor in exchange for piano lessons. His musical studies, important to his career as a critic and composer, included Modern French Music and Orchestration in the French Style, taught by his advisor, Edward Burlingame Hill. From Dr. Archibold T. Davison, Thomson studied History of Choral Music and sang in the Harvard Glee Club. He occasionally directed and often accompanied the group.

Thomson made his first trip to Paris with the Harvard Glee Club in 1921. The fortunate student remained the following year on a John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship secured by Professor Hill. In Paris his mainly liturgical approach to music was supplimented by a more secular, French-oriented view. As Thomson once said, "I came in my Harvard years to identify with France virtually all of music's recent glorious past, most of its acceptable present, and

a large part of its future."[8] This opinion holds true for the composer today.

Henry Taylor Parker sent a "To Whom It May Concern" letter to the fellowship recipient stating that Thomson would be the foreign correspondent for the Boston Transcript. An article Thomson provided in that position, on a series of orchestral concerts, led to the Boston Symphony Orchestra board hiring as its conductor, Serge Koussevitsky. Several years later, Parker sent a note to Thomson stating he owed to him the only available pictures of the conductor and that the trustees cogitated about the critic's article concerning the Russian maestro. Koussevitsky elaborated further by saying that it was Thomson's influence which brought about his appointment.

While in Paris, the composer studied with Nadia Boulanger. Aaron Copland was also one of her private students. At a tea, the young man met most of the French Six, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud. Several times Thomson had the chance to meet Erik Satie. The budding composer never engaged in much conversation with the man for fear of being disillusioned. Satie's early music was a definite model to Thomson. The composer had studied in detail Satie's music and later gave the Americal premiere of his Socrates.

> He was not yet sure what attracted him in the art of that independent spirit, [Satie] whose war

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[8]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, p. 51.

> against pomposity and everything else official had anticipated the esthetic of Dada. He knew only that its simplicity was far from naive, that it was a congenial climate, that it might be among the lasting values of the twentieth century for him.[9]

John Cage, too, has made reference to Satie's influence on the composer's music, "Several critics, among them Frederick Goldbeck, have referred to Thomson as 'an American Satie'."[10]

The student's year in Paris passed quickly. The following year, 1922-23, found Thomson completing his degree at Harvard University. From 1923-24, the Harvard graduate, on a Juilliard Trust Fellowship, studied counterpoint with Rosario Scalero and conducting with Chalmers Clifton in New York.

The composer was employed as an assistant-instructor at Harvard University in 1924-1925. During the year, he contacted H.L. Mencken for advice about writing. Mencken asked the aspiring young man to write an article explaining jazz. Thomson did, and it was published in Mencken's periodical, The American Mercury. He also wrote for Vanity Fair, a magazine that included literary texts by Satie, Jean Cocteau, Colette, E.E. Cummings, and Gertrude Stein. He contributed an article a month for about a year, since then, "it was quite the thing to write for."[11]

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[9]Hoover and Cage, op. cit., p. 44.

[10]Hoover and Cage, op. cit., p. 117.

[11]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, p. 70.

When it appeared that Thomson could make a successful career of writing, he returned to Paris in September 1925. The artist stated at the time, "My business is making music, not talking about it."[12] Thus, his career goals changed. The maturing man wished to be primarily a composer. Thomson's walking out on success perpetuated an action that was to become a familiar pattern in his life. This pattern was recognized by the composer in these words:

> It had never been my habit to relinquish a thing while learning to do it, but rather to give up only that which I had proven I could do. In quitting at that time teaching and performance, I set for all time my precedent, incorrigibly to be followed in later life, of walking out on success every time it occurred.[13]

Except for an occasional article, the critic did not write again until 1931, when Copland requested an essay about himself for the Contemporary American Composers Series published by the League of Composers in their quarterly, Modern Music. It was simply titled, "Aaron Copland." The writer's contribution warranted twenty dollars.

Between the years 1925-1940, Thomson lived in Europe, mainly Paris. These years were interspersed with several trips to the United States. The man travelled, composed, entertained, and increased his circle of friends. In 1926, the composer met the writer, Gertrude Stein. He had been

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[12]Hoover and Cage, Virgil Thomson . . ., p. 48.

[13]Thomson, . . .Thomson, p. 74.

introduced to her verse in his Harvard years thorugh a poet in the English department, S. Foster Damon. The latter had given Thomson a copy of Stein's, Tender Buttons. Partially through Stein's influence, the composer formed associations with leaders of contemporary movements in all the arts, from all places. It was not unusual to find Thomson entertaining in his Paris flat such people as, Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Pablo Picasso, Cocteau, Christian Dior, Henri Sauguet, George Antheil, Max Jacob, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway (the last only mentioned once for the host was not too fond of him).

During the 1930's the critic lived both in Paris and the United States. His activities included reviewing ballets produced in the French capital for Modern Music. The nomadic musician returned to the States in 1934, and worked with the director, John Houseman, and the new actor, Orson Welles (age 19) in a theater adventure sponsored by the Works Progress Administration. It was called the Phoenix Theater. In conjunction with the director, Lorenze Pare, the artist composed several film scores and, in 1937, with choreographer, Lew Christensen, a ballet, Filling Station.

The industrious man was elected to the board of the American Composers Alliance in 1938. This was a group that Copland and he were instrumental in forming. In the same year Thomson, the writer, was approached by two publishers, William Morrow and W.W. Norton, concerning the possibilities

of writing a book. The sought-after man returned to Paris under contract with the publisher, William Morrow.

Virgil Thomson's first book, The State of Music, was released in 1939. It described, unconventionally, a composer's world, including the imposed economic pressures. The author advocated the unification of the profession by defining the roles of publishers, producers, and consumers in relation to the artist. Thomson did not believe that managers should have the final word in programming or the control over the performer/composer, especially financially. This point was often advocated throughout his career as a critic. With The State of Music, the composer emerged as a "born writer, and that still more infrequent phenomenon, a musician with an acute but indoctrinaire sense of the social, political, and economics aspects of his art."[14] Also in 1939, the successful author, with Copland, encouraged the establishment of Arrow Music Press. The aim of which was to promote modern music.

With World War II around the corner, the composer arrived in America in the summer of 1940. Not sure of what he was going to do next, Geoffrey Parsons, the chief-editorial writer of the New York Herald-Tribune, opportunely approached Thomson with an offer. Parsons had been in search of a music critic since March (1940) to replace the

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[14]Hoover and Cage, op. cit., p. 89.

late Lawrence Gilman. Virgil Thomson was his man. The composer informed Parsons and Ogden Reid, the Tribune's editor, "that he was untrained in journalistic rountines, that his views could offend vested musical interests, (and) that his approach to criticism would sweep the Herald-Tribune into the tempest of music-as-it-really-is."[15]

Virgil Thomson began work on October 10, 1940, as Head Music Critic of the New York Herald-Tribune with Francis Perkins as his principal assistant. He assumed full reign of the department. Never once in his fourteen years (1940-1954) was he advised on how to handle the position by his superiors. Thomson's first assignment was to cover the season's opening concert of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra. A new career was thus launched.

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[15]Ibid., p. 91.

CHAPTER III

THE ART OF JUDGING MUSIC

What is music criticism? How did it come about? These questions and others stemming from them, could lead the reader to another thesis. For the purpose of this study, however, Max Graf may offer the appropriate omnibus statement.

> Musical criticism is one of the forces that have molded the modern world, a tributary to the mighty stream of criticism that began to flow through Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century. Since then, criticism has participated in every phase of the foundation of modern ideas. . . . Criticism analyzed the structure and state of society . . . It was, in fact, the chief instrument of enlightenment.
>
> Among the Greeks the original meaning of the word had been division or analysis. In the eighteenth century, criticism had come to mean the separation of truth from appearance, reality from phenomenon, and essence from surface.
>
> Art, like all the other activities of the human mind, had to submit to critical examination. And thus modern art criticism and musical criticism were born.[1]

Being a composer and a critic is not unique to Virgil Thomson. Roger Sessions once said, "Some of the greatest

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[1]Max Graf, Composer and Critic: Two Hundred Years of Music Criticism. (New York: W.W. Norton Company, Inc., 1946), pp. 30, 33.

critics in the past have been creative artists whose vital curiosity has enabled them to bring their best powers to the task of citicism."[2] Other composers who wrote of their contemporaries were Robert Schumann, Hector Berlioz, Richard Wagner, Claude Debussy, Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky, and Franz Liszt (see Bibliography). Liszt, for example, thought that criticism should be more of an activity of productive artists because it would have more value to both artists, the one critiquing and the one composing. The critic's own art would mature through the reflection of ones reviews and the comparison of anothers works.[3]

In the twentieth century, however, a composer writing as a music critic for a daily newspaper is less common. Thus, Thomson's overall viewpoint, due to his personal creative experience, has little in common with the criticism of Edward Hanslick, Ernest Newman, or Bernard Shaw, because not one of those critics was a composer or professional musician. Max Graf epitomized the role of the critic in three areas; he derived these from an historical comparison, pointing out that music criticism depended on the contemporary social structure, with each age having its own

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[2]Roger Sessions, "The Scope of Music Criticism," in Music and Criticism: A Symposium (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), p. 44.

[3]Olga Samaroff, "The Performer as Critic," in Music and Criticism . . ., p. 73.

emphasis. Graf called the first role that of the critical type, whose dogmatic approach was that of the seventeenth century. The critic that fed on his own raptures and enthusiastic outbursts would belong to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century romantic school. The modern critic was seen by Graf as one, also being subjective, like the romantic, and one who wrote hastily his impressions of a concert, e.g., a critic who wrote for a daily newspaper. He goes on to say: "There is no more effective tool with which to build a new musical world than the written words of the masters of musical criticism."[4] Graf viewed the American critic as a type of Lone Ranger, who gallops into the concert hall, strikes down the criminal--composer or virtuoso--and disappears like lightning."[5]

The Harvard Symposium on Music Criticism held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in May 1947, resulted from the desire that "someone ought to do something about music criticism."[6] The Symposium was attended by more than 500 guests of the University, representing a variety of musical interests and professions. The people attending came from more than forty states. The format of the symposium was designed to stimulate thoughts and actions which

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[4]Graf, op. cit., p. 321.

[5]Ibid., p. 305.

[6]Richard F. French, Preface in Music and Criticism . . ., p. v-viii.

in turn might contribute to the effectiveness of music critics in our daily lives. The Symposium was held in hopes that submitting the contents of music criticism to analysis would establish its relationship to other fields of criticism and reduce the objectives to some form of definition. Hence, what is music criticism?

The intent of the Symposium was not completely realized, but, many old myths were dispelled, such as the idea that the critic represented a panacea for all musical ills. Much discussion ensued from several disparate opinions. E.M. Forster,[7] for example, believed that the critic did not help the artist and that the artist, when in a creative state, found criticism either irrelevant, or was possibly unconscious of it. Edgar Wind,[8] on the other hand, thought that intellect and analytical care could govern over and influence creation to enhance a work. Wind espoused further that "criticism can be a creative force in the very making of a work of art."[9]

A point that was agreed upon by most and even mentioned by some, Richard F. French, Archibald T. Davison, Roger Sessions, was that love of music was the primary raison d'être

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[7]E.M. Forster, "The Raison d'Être of Criticism in the Arts," in Music and Criticism . . ., p. 15.

[8]Edgar Wind, "The Critical Nature of a Work of Art," in Music and Criticism . . ., pp. 53-72.

[9]Ibid., p. 57.

for criticism. At an early age Virgil Thomson knew that music was his vocation, his love. In a Sunday edition of the Herald-Tribune, December 22, 1946, a fifteen year-old girl wrote to Thomson stating her love of music and her desire to write about the subject. Not being a performer, she wanted his advice on becoming a music critic. The critic's reply:

> A young person who can "concentrate on any symphony program" and who writes as charmingly, . . . should be a godsend to any editor. . . .my correspondent is seriously, and perhaps permanently involved with music. One doesn't have to follow music in order to love it. I doubt if one has to follow it to be a music critic, either. Follow it completely, I mean. Though it does help to be able to distinguish the commoner syntactic devices. Actually one criticizes least well that which one follows more easily, since familiarity breeds a great indifference.

The Symposium brought out many ideas of what music criticism should or should not do. In no way did it try to resolve all the difficulties involved or answer everything for the critic. In summary, the members of the Symposium shared these basic beliefs of a music critic:

1) A critic "should not be detached from that which he criticizes."[10]

2) Criticism should educate through precision. (Is a musical journalist qualified to do this?)

3) Critic should stimulate thought.

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[10]Sessions, op. cit., p. 4.

4) Critic, "ought to combine experience with innocence, know everything inside-out and still be surprised."[11]

And a primary consideration which should always exist behind the writing of a professional music critic,

5) "Music criticism lasts whereas music is temporal."[12]

Some other comments expressed on music criticism to further elucidate the reviews of Virgil Thomson are included to present the reader with more than one perspective. From a 1927 weekly music forum for the New York Evening Post, Olga Samaroff stated her belief that a music critic's responsibility to a daily newspaper was to inform, stimulate, and offer critical appraisal of music. Otto Kinkeldey thought it was important to remember that the "word criticism [was a] synonym for judgement."[13] In support of criticism as an attitude of educational and cultural value, this quote by E.M. Forster: "[Criticism] civilizes community, builds up standards, forms theories, stimulates, directs and encourages individuals, . . . exposes fraud, pretentiousness, and checks conceit."[14] Thus, criticism is a necessary tool for everyday living.

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[11] Forster, op. cit., p. 26.

[12] Otto Kinkeldey, "Consequences of the Recorded Performance," in Music and Criticism . . ., p. 117.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Forster, op. cit., p. 20.

Ascribed to William James Henderson (1853-1937) critic for The New York Times and New York Sun, and most in line with Virgil Thomson's philosophy:

> What we should value most in critical commentary is its point of view, its endeavor to attain an altitude, from which the whole breadth of the subject may be surveyed.[15]

Coinciding with the above comment is Thomson's statement on "The Art of Judging Music,"

> The public does not have to be right. Musicians do not have to be right. Nobody has to be right. Any opinion is legitimate to act on, provided one accepts in advance the responsibilities of that action. Any opinion is legitimate to express that can be stated in clear language. and any opinion at all is legitimate to hold. As I said before, it is not the yes or no of a judgement that is valuable to other people, though one's original yes or no about a certain kind of music may have determined a whole lifetime's activity. What other people get profit from following is that activity itself, the spectacle of a mind at work. That is why, just as an emotional reaction is more significant for its force than its direction, a musical judgement is of value to others less for the conclusions reached than for the methods by which these have been, not even arrived at, but elaborated, defended and expressed.[16]

To continue the thought, the critic's reply to the inquiry, "How to prepare for a musical profession?" was, "study music and learn to write."[17] In his correspondence

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[15]Graf, Composer and Critic . . ., p. 315.

[16]Virgil Thomson, The Art of Judging Music (N.Y.: Greenwood Press, 1948), pp. 9-10

[17]Virgil Thomson, "The Art of Judging Music," in Music and Criticism . . ., p. 113.

with this author pertaining to courses he taught in music reviewing, Thomson responded,

> I always treat these as if I were teaching English, because I practically always find that the students are better prepared in music than they are writing. Music criticism, of course, is primarily writing; music is the subject. If they are ignorant of the subject they should not be reviewing music. But if they are not accomplished as writers they are helpless for reviewing anything.[18]

Another indication of the critic's strong feelings toward the ability to write was provided in a graduate seminar in music reviewing held at New York University during the school year 1941-42. It was taught by all four reviewers of the New York Herald-Tribune, Thomson, Francis Perkins, Robert Lawrence and Jerone D. Bohm.

> Perkins taught them newspaper routines, how to check information, also how to analyze an orchestral score. Bohm showed them how to review records and how to listen to anything. Lawrence explained the opera and went through with them quite a lot of opera repertory. Myself, I treated the seminar as a course in English composition.[19]

Hence, Virgil Thomson's approach to reviews and writing emanated not only from the standpoint of a composer-musician, but also, from a thorough knowledge of the use of the English language. This understanding, instilled in him as a youth in the Kansas City schools and during the Harvard University years, was the salient feature which brought his

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[18] In a personal letter from Thomson to the present writer, Feb. 18, 1981.

[19] Ibid.

work to the attention of the New York Herald-Tribune. The paper that Thomson referred to as a "Gentleman's Paper,"[20] with a liberal Republican slant, had an average weekday circulation in those years (1940-1954) of 450,000. The paper sought political influence through family acquaintance and through its columnists, who aspired to intellectual distinction; thus, the explanation of Thomson's reference to the Herald-Tribune previously cited. Others writing for the Tribune at the time of the critic included Dorothy Thompson, Walter Lippmann, Percy Hammond, and Walter Kerr. Henry Edward Krehbiel and Lawrence Gilman preceded Thomson, and Paul Henry Lang succeeded him.

Thomson said that a writer's distinction on the paper "was judged less by his leadership of public taste--high, low, or middlebrow--than by his skill in handling words, sentences and paragraphs."[21] Neither radical opinions on art, nor reactionary ones, could shake the editors if they were well-written. It was Reid and Parsons attitude that "any informed statement could be published if it observed the amenities and was expressed in clear English."[22]

The troublesome topic of style in discourse has been an age-old subject. A complete discussion of that subject

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[20] Thomson, . . .Thomson, p. 322.

[21] Virgil Thomson, Music Reviewed: 1940-1954 (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967) Preface p. v.

[22] Ibid.

falls outside the scope of this thesis; therefore, the present writer will treat Thomson's approach to writing in this manner: that which is personal and reflective of a man's singular condition, limited to lexical flexibility of the subject, and those factors limited to the syntactic flexibility of the English language.[23]

The solution to the problem of discerning the personal preferences in writing of a solitary man, Virgil Thomson, was realized through researching his personal background. From that research effort, the writer could perceive the conditions and credentials which revealed themselves in Thomson's reviews. His penchant for modern music, vocal music, church music and opera was unveiled. His knowledge of the singing voice, his experiences in church choirs and in the Harvard Glee Club, his conducting engagements, all were activities which contributed to the critic's mode of expression. Thomson was able to present to his readers an historical approach as well as a compositional one in the production of his reviews due to his formal training as both a creative and recreative musician. Through the writer's associations with the other arts, including stage, screen, and radio, and his political interests both in the United States and abroad, his column afforded the ultimate

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[23]For further elaboration see Ronald H. Carpenter, "The Essential Schemes of Syntax: An analysis of Rhetorical Theory's Recommendations for Uncommon Word Orders," in Quarterly Journal of Speech, Vol. 55, April 1969, No. 2, pp. 161-8.

in eclecticism. Parallelisms between his writing approach and that of French critics were discernible; indeed, Thomson's French bias was particularly surveyed. France was, after all, a country about which he was exceedingly knowledgeable. He spoke the French language fluently having lived there intermittently for about forty years. In addition, his formal training was steeped in the ways of the French (Chapter II). Thomson had a definite understanding of the syntactical structure of the English language resulting from his previously mentioned training. Despite the limited flexibility of terminology due to the subject presented and to the scope of the audience, Thomson's critiques were readily perceived; they were "at once sassy and classy."[24]

At this point, Thomson's reviews will be treated with regard to each area of his writing that this author found stylistically intriguing. It was deemed expeditious to begin with the most obvious features of his compositional approach, i.e., description and simile, and to close with the more obscure elements of persuasive discourse as previously stated in the definition relating to his approach to writing reviews.

Thomson's descriptive powers were well exemplified in his discussion of Arturo Toscanini's ability to be throughly absorbed in the music he conducted:

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[24]Thomson, Music Reviewed . . ., preface p. v.

> Whether he goes deep into the substance of a work or, in one man's opinion, misses its sense completely, he always builds its architecture soundly and fits in the detail so smoothly that the piece comes out all streamlined, like a plywood bomber or a racing yacht.[25]

On Shostakovitch's Eighth Symphony performed by the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall and broadcasted by the Columbia Broadcasting System, the critic opined, "The piece itself, however, is as plain as the nose on your face."[26]

On Martinu's Second Symphony, not only did Thomson give the reader background material, but he also provided a vivid, descriptive metaphor. Indeed, the closing line summed up the critic's assessment of the work:

> Like the shimmering sonoroties of his master, Albert Roussel, the glittering and note-heavy textures of Bohuslav Martinu are, for all their transparency, an inflexible medium of expression. They suit best exotic or fanciful subjects. Applied to straightforward melodies of song-like character or to the semi-abstract motifs that are the basis of symphonic continuity, they create a dichotomy of style that suggest a photograph of your Aunt Sophie in front of the Taj Mahal. Neither the subject nor the background appears to advantage in such an arrangement. The background goes a little tawdry, and the subject does not express itself completely. The Second Symphony last night sounded mechanical, repetitive, over-elaborate, and essentially trivial.[27]

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[25] Virgil Thomson, "The Maestro," Nov. 1, 1943, review from NYHT in The Musical Scene (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 54.

[26] Thomson, "More of the Same," April 3, 1944, The Musical Scene, p. 104.

[27] Thomson, "Repeating Pattern," Dec. 31, 1943 in Musical . . ., pp. 107-108.

Examples of Thomson's use of simile, from a review of a Philadelphia Orchestra concert with Eugene Ormandy conducting, entitled "Velvet Paws," follows:

> Nowhere else is there such a string choir; one would like to stroke its tone, as if the suavity of it were a visual and a tactile thing, like pale pinky-brown velvet.[28]

on composer-pianist Oscar Levant:

> Nevertheless, the impact of Mr. Levant's battling personality is not absent. His music like his mind, is tough and real and animated by a ferocious integrity. Its off moments are like the Sunday afternoon of a pugilist, all dressed up and no place to go. But even so, biceps are visible through the flimsy suiting of Hollywood atonality.[29]

Another example on Stravinsky's Violin Concerto is presented below:

> It is as tightly woven as a bird-cage. As four bird-cages, to be exact, because it consists of four tight and tough little movements, each of them minutely massive. Excepting the last. That is more loose-hung, more dependent on mimicries of Tchaikovskian charm than the other three.[30]

Representative also is the following feline reference:

> Charles Ives songs have a certain sincerity and worthiness about them. On the whole they are pretty kittenish; the accompaniments are practically kitty on the keys.[31]

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[28] Idem, "Velvet Paws," Oct. 16, 1940 in Musical . . ., pp. 7-8.

[29] Idem, "Levant Tough and Tender," Feb. 18, 1942, Musical . . ., p. 131-132.

[30] Thomson, "Close Communion," Jan. 23, 1941 Review in NYHT.

[31] Thomson, "Serious Music," Oct. 21, 1940, in NYHT, New Friends of Music, First concert of the season in Town Hall with the Budapest String Quartet.

Humor was evidenced not only in the body of the review, but also, in the titles to capture the reader's eye. A few that struck this writer, "Wrestling and Shadow-Boxing,"[32] "Sound without Fury;"[33] "Brahms without Bathos;"[34] "The Poetry of Precision;"[35] and lastly, "Lurching and Mugging."[36] Can one guess what the subject matters may have been? Or, another example of subtle humor occurred in "The Berlioz Case"[37] where Thomson presented an argument of greatness, "If world-wide admiration, both lay and professional, and a profound influence of the technique of his art do not define "greatness" in a composer, then I give up."

Whereas Kathleen Hoover[38] implied that Thomson's leaving the standard repertory and standard soloists to his staff was in order to alert the public to newer trends, by visiting other cities, universities, and festivals featuring novel works, this author holds a differing view. It was

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[32]Thomson, op. cit., Nov. 25, 1940 review in New York Herald-Tribune.

[33]Thomson, op. cit., Jan. 18, 1945, review in NYHT.

[34]Thomson, op. cit., April 2, 1947, review in NYHT.

[35]Thomson, op. cit., Feb. 2, 1945, review in NYHT.

[36]Thomson, op. cit., April 17, 1947, review in NYHT.

[37]Thomson, op. cit., Oct. 11, 1942 in The Musical Scene, p. 78.

[38]Hoover and Cage, Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music.

true that Thomson did include a wide coverage of musical events in his columns, and did show a sensitivity to new talent and unique American compositions. True, also, is the fact that he traveled around the country and wired-in reviews keeping the public aware of contemporary music and positions. In doing these things Hoover seemed to allude that Thomson's actions were those of a super-hero. In the judgment of this author the critics actions were motivated by more pragmatic considerations. Thomson did review standard repertory and soloists as the previous examples have shown. The critic was, after all, a contemporary American composer and one of his reasons for accepting the post of Head Critic was that it could enable him to have his own works performed. Another factor which prompted him to seek new and novel talent was to keep his position "alive" for fourteen years. Consistent with his philosophy was his frequent cirticism of the east-coast orchestras for only playing what he termed "fifty pieces,"[39] the standard repertory and not enough new works, however; this point will be discussed further in Chapter IV.

To highlight the critic's interest in novelty performances was this example of a concert reviewed in Newark at an evening service of a Nergo congregation at the Church of God in Christ, April 13, 1941. The review concerned a

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[39]Paul Henry Lang, "The Musical Journalist," in Music and Criticism . . ., p. 146.

traveling evangelist, Brother Utah Smith. Titled "Sacred Swing," the article described the religious message delivered through the use of an electric guitar and tapping feet; with only an occasional shout of, "Praise the Lord" or "Dust my feet." Brother Smith's message was primarily presented through the use of Swing without sermon, indeed, a novelty. Another instance in the Herald-Tribune which depicted historical information and novelty was contained in a review of May 26, 1941, titled "Fa Sol La Fa Sol La Mi Fa" on the rural 1800's technique of part-song singing with intervals of the same name.

Thomson often covered premiere performances in this country (sometimes having heard them previously in Europe). One such program prompted the review, "Expressive Percussion," January 22, 1945. The review explained the performance of a program of compositions for the prepared piano at The New School for Social Research. The program featured such works of John Cage, as The Perilous Night; A Book of Music for Two Pianos; Three Dances. Thomson concluded that the concert was a delight from all angles.

Some finer points of the critic's writing are featured through his use of persuasive discourse in his commentary. His review of Artur Schnabel, "Equal Expressivity,"[40] set up an excellent example of contradiction as a means of

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[40] Thomson, "Equalized Expressivity," March 28, 1944, review in NYHT.

persuasive discourse. In the first paragraph Thomson led the reader to believe that Schnabel was an expert,

> Artur Schnabel, who played last night in Carnegie Hall the second of three recitals devoted to the piano music of Beethoven, has for some thirty or forty years made the composer the object of his special attention. He passes indeed, for an expert on the subject.

The critic continued in the following sentences to support that idea. Then, in the second paragraph, he opposed his first statement on Schnabel's "expert" ideas.

> Neither, need they, I think, be taken as the voice of authority. For all the consistency and logic of his musicianship, there is too much a modicum of late-nineteenth-century Romanticism in Mr. Schnabel's own personality to make his Beethoven wholly convincing to musicians of the mid-twentieth. But I do think that they [piano music] are another kind of Romanticism from Schnabel's, which seems to be based on the Wagnerian theories of expressivity.

With this apparent contradiction, the reviewer then presented the remainder of his argument in support of paragraph two. Through the opposition of the two paragraphs, Thomson utilized a form of dialectic process. His thesis--"Schnabel is an expert" became his antithesis "Schnabel is not an expert," which became synthesized as an overall unsuccessful performance of Beethoven by the performer.

Thomson employed conventional syntactic structure in the bulk of his reviews since he was writing for a daily newspaper. Basically, he followed jorunalistic procedures of who, what, where, when, why, and how. Deviations occurred more noticeably in his Sunday articles which presented some of his best examples of persuasive discourse, e.g.,

those advocating modern music. This writer did not find any examples, for instance, of uncomon, yet, grammatically correct syntax as a salient feature. On occasion, the critic would use non-idiomatic words to emphasize a point, e.g.

> Little sixteenth-note flourishes get slighted and come out higglety-pigglety, trivial.[41]

Higglety-pigglety is hardly idiomatic to the precision of playing sixteenth-notes; however, the thought is understandable to even a lay audience by the mere onomatopoeia. Sometimes Thomson would deliberately suspend his main thought for several sentences to build-up reader interest. This would be considered contrary to journalistic writing of key sentences appearing first. Main thought suspension:

> Managers refer to him as Maestro. Orchestral players call him the Old Man in much of the same spirit of reverence and healthy fear with which persons resident on the banks of the Mississippi never use any other name for that mighty stream than simply The River. This department had anticipated employing the polite but noncommital form, Mr. Toscanini. After last Saturday night's rendition of the Verdi Te Deum and Requiem, we feel more like shouting to the city simply: "The Old Man is back!"[42]

The critic's main thought suspension underwent Maestro, Old Man and Mississippi River before reaching the climax, Mr. Toscanini, an unusual ploy for a newspaper report.

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[41] Thomson, "Clumsy Conducting," Nov. 8, 1940, review in NYHT.

[42] Thomson, "Theater and Religion," Nov. 25, 1940, in The Musical Scene, p. 80.

To conclude this portion of Thomson's structural writing approach, an example from the same review was chosen to illustrate his use of redundancy. He not only designated the decreased information and predictability of a symbol, in a converse manner (unpredictable with certainty) but also, through the schematic repetition of the word "sincere" produced a more emphatic result.

> Verdi, though not a particularly pious man, was a sincere Catholic; he was a sincere man of the theater and a sincere Italian. His Requiem is as sincere a piece of theatrical Italian Catholicism as has ever been written. Sincere Protestants often find it shocking. Sincere non-believers are likely to find it comic.[43]

Upon reading would not one tend to remember this review? It is sincerely hoped that one would! (The topics of Thomson's reviews will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter IV.)

Having presented the positive traits of Virgil Thomson's approach to writing, it would be neglectful of the reader if the negative aspects were not also observed. Indeed, the positive aspects of the critic's style certainly outweighed the weaknesses. He contended, in "The Art of Judging Music," that any responsible opinion was valid if it was stated in clear language. The reader could choose to agree or disagree. Everyone was entitled to an opinion. With this in mind, little fault could be found in Thomson's approach. His criticism was precise, clear, often full of bite, for

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[43]Ibid., p. 81.

the most part well-paced, and easily read by a lay audience without insulting esoteric individuals. By the same token that any opinion was legitimate, it was true that any opinion could be questioned or faulted. Hence, this was true of Virgil Thomson's criticism.

In the Introduction to The Musical Scene, the reviewer protected himself with this precautionary statement:

> I hope that a clear attitude has been expressed. . . . This does not mean that I hold my opinions to be all true. I do not. Nor do I consider them to be permanent. I am both submissive to facts and amenable to argument. And I consider my personal biases to be facts, not opinions. I will not even hold, therefore, that these do not carry some weight in the balance of my judgment. But if my opinions are not wholly unbiased, neither are they irresponsible. They are the opinions of a man from Missouri who is also a workman.

An extensive analysis of Thomson's review revealed that, in general, he was consistent with his opinions over the years. Causes that he advocated in 1940 were reiterated in 1954. In particular, his bias to French music has remained a constant throughout his career. While his opinions were presented in a responsible fashion, they showed his personal bias. An example of an unchanging evaluation is quoted from a review of January 23, 1941,

> Close Communion: . . .the score for Cotillon, pieced together out of Chabrier, has lost none of its loveliness since first I heard it in 1932, though I thought at the time and still think the finale needs a more sonorous instrumentation.

Thomson's most serious shortcoming existed in his predilection to French music. Even though French culture

was an area of his specialization, this writer found fault in that being a justification for such a heavy emphasis. Such a strong passion could not help but obscure receptivity to some performances and enhance others. In a review of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 ("Emperor") performed by Robert Casadesus with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony orchestra under the direction of Artur Rodzinski, December 31, 1943, Thomson interjected,

> Alone among the great virtuosos, Mr. Casadesus has preserved the intimacy in the framework of power-projection. He has also preserved the French rhythmic tradition (which is the ancient and basic European one) in the rendering of German music.

Countless reviews revealed French bias, and many essays through the years were devoted to topics such as, "French Music Here,"[44] "Paris Forever,"[45] "French Rhythm."[46] Other articles were related to French composers, e.g., Maurice Ravel, Olivier Messiaen, Darius Milhaud, and Francis Poulenc. While these essays were informative from one standpoint, there were, and are, other countries and other musical traditions which were, by comparison, slighted. This definitely was an area of Thomson's criticism that did not balance with

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[44]Thomson, op. cit., Jan. 5, 1941, in Music Reviewed . . ., p. 32.

[45]Thomson, op. cit., Nov. 6, 1941, in Music Reviewed . . ., p. 44.

[46]Thomson, op. cit., Nov. 14, 1944, in Music Reviewed . . ., p. 101.

the attention given to other reviews. In one instance [showing political interest] Thomson aided the wife of the Economic Secretary to the French Embassy, Hervé Alphand. Claude Alphand, the wife, was singing French chansons in New York nightclubs in 1940. Virgil Thomson wrote,

> Loving both her presence and her singing for making me feel that I was back in France, I helped to start off her career by reviewing its debut.[47]

Hoover entertained the notion that Thomson's criticisms were so practical and matter of fact, or so professional, that some of the music's communicative aspects eluded him. She believed he listened to music as an intellectual task and assumed his readers did the same, that being the height of true art. This writer, once again, did not agree with Hoover's assessment. It is the present-writer's opinion that music criticism need not emphasize the subjective aspects of a performance. Subjectivity should be left up to the individual and not shaded by the critic's influence of how the music made him feel.

Hoover maintained that the critic did not always develop an idea to its fullest extent, darting from one point to another. She defended Thomson by saying the man kept his reader thinking. The biographer continued by declaring that his style was erratic and that the reviewer was

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[47]Thomson, . . . Thomson, p. 340.

not above peppering his column with vulgarisms for shock purposes.

The nature of newspaper writing could promote darting from one point to another due to space, but that hardly justifies the action. Thomson did leave room for question. For example, in discussing a soprano, Dorothy Maynor, in a recital at Town Hall, a discussion none too flattering, he stated, "She is immature vocally and immature emotionally."[48] The vocal immaturity was supported by previous statements; however, there was no further mention of emotional immaturity, nor did the first part of the review suggest that. If not glossed over by a reader, the point could very well have left one hanging.

Thomson's criticisms were on occasion spicy but contained nothing that should have been unprinted. If anything, that was how the phrase "at once sassy and classy"[49] came about in describing the critic's style. Thomson definitely set readers thinking, if only in disagreement.

Hoover said readers criticized the reviewer on his opinions claiming they stemmed from a passing psychological state instead of an objective philosophy of music. This

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[48]Thomson, "Ambitious Vocalism," Oct. 24, 1940 (Thursday) review in NYHT.

[49]Thomson, Music Reviewed . . ., Preface p. v.

author does not concur with that view. Thomson may have been unaccustomly too harsh in reviewing some of their favorites, or too "sassy," but not overall. Needless to say, he answered his own correspondence. With disgruntled readers, he replied with his thanks to each, for, "delightfully indignant outbursts," and politely reminded them that, "difference of opinion is the life of art."[50] On the other hand, Olin Downes responded in a letter, which summarizes this chapter:

> The whole bumbling business of music criticism as it is written today has been perked up by your arrival. [Virgil Thomson] Life is the better for it, less stupid, less logy, less bumptious. You will do everybody in our line a world of good, provided none of us is fool enough to try to imitate you.[51]

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[50] Hoover and Cage, Virgil Thomson . . ., p. 92.

[51] Ibid., pp. 92-93.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRITIC SPEAKS

What positions did Virgil Thomson tenure in his column through the years? What "type" of music critic was he? The music critic, Olga Samaroff, believed that criticism should not be used as a tribunal for musicians and that the review was only the impressions and/or opinions of a sole-being. Virgil Thomson did speak out against poor performances, mis-management by musical directors, boards, policies, and a variety of musical ills that affected the musical public, directly or indirectly. In that sense, his column was a tribunal. Like Graf's "Lone Ranger," Thomson sometimes had to leave before a concert was over in order to meet his deadlines, but, his reviews would mention the necessity. The Missourian's reviews were intended as one man's opinion. Yet, his criticism effectuated more than just that, for the tasks of an American critic are much different from those of earlier European critics. Whereas a romantic era critic could passionately slander a composer to the point of obstructing one's career, an American critic is kept more in check through the public's voice. Then, again, an American critic can be more of a discussion leader

in the development of the public's musical tastes. [A point that co-incides with Max Graf's view.] The American reviewer does not have to be as subjective as the Romantic era critic due to his role as a watchdog of the musical culture. Thomson's bite was often as strong as his bark. His criticism, though, could be seen as an education to music lovers and a diffusion of vast knowledge about music. Virgil Thomson was often an advocate as a critic rather than a Lone Ranger.

When he had something good to say, he said it. This example from the Herald-Tribune, November 9, 1940, "Correct and Beautiful," praising Kirsten Flagstad:

> . . . such an assured mistress is she of her voice, and so clear in her comprehension of the songs she sings, . . . she can afford the highest luxury of the concert stage, which is to sing the songs of Brahms and Grieg and Hugo Wolf and of our American song-writers as simply and as candidly as Miss Helen Hayes, say, might read Shakespeare's sonnets in a drawing-room. . . I doubt if there has existed within the memory of living musicians another singer so gifted as to voice, so satisfying as to taste, and withal such mistress of her vocal instrument as Madame Flagstad.

Not only did Thomson state why Flagstad's voice was a pleasure to hear, but, through his comparison to Helen Hayes, he depicted a broader reference for those who may not have been familiar with the acclaimed singer.

In a performance by the pianist, John Kirkpatrick, at Town Hall, the critic addressed several subjects that he advocated, as well as lavishing praise.

> John Kirkpatrick, . . . has a way of making one feel happy about American music. He does this by loving it, understanding it, and playing

> it very beautifully. He plays, in fact, everything very beautifully that I have ever heard him play. But people who play that beautifully so rarely play American music that Mr. Kirkpatrick's recitals are doubly welcome . . .
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> The loveliness of his playing comes from a combination of tonal delicacy with really firm rhythm. Exactitude with flexibility at all the levels of loudness is the characteristic of American pianism that transcends all our local schools of composition and lack of same. It is what makes us a major musical people, and it is exactly the rhythmic quality that escapes our European interpreters. European tonal beauty, of course, more often than not escapes American pianists. Mr. Kirkpatrick's combination of European tonal technique with full understanding of American rhythm makes his playing of American works a profoundly exciting thing and a new thing in music.[1]

The subjects Thomson addressed, American rhythm, American music, and piano pedagogy were only a sampling of the topics he supported through the years. The program Kirkpatrick played consisted of two premieres of Chanler, Prelude and Fugue in D Major and Prelude in C Minor; Concord, Mass. 1840-60 by Ives; Woodland Sketches of MacDowell; and Sonata, Op. 1. by Roy Harris. In reviewing the works, Virgil Thomson provided the reader with an historical perspective along with one of compositional techniques. This was a format common to his music criticism. For example, in discussing the Ives' he mentioned that Lawrence Gilman had labeled it the best work ever written by an American.

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[1]Thomson, "American Rhythm," Nov. 24, 1943 in The Musical Scene, pp. 196-198.

Thomson informed the reader that the four movements, though lengthy, were really symphonic poems. Of the four, the critic commented "The Alcotts" was formally the best integrated and most likely, more original, or indigenous in its musical scope. Once again, he advocated the cause of modern music and American music, "In any case, here is music, real music; and Americans should have no serious difficulty accepting its subject matter or understanding its ingenuous grandeurs."[2]

Thomson often gave his readers his thoughts on premiere performances, acquainting the audience with current musical trends and new pieces by American composers. Through his insight and sensibility of performers, composers and conductors, based on his own experiences and professional training, the man helped the American public understand many new musical idioms. The following is an exposition on Bartok:

> The despair in his quartets is no maladjustment. It is a realistic facing, through the medium of pure feeling, of the human condition . . . as this was perceptible to a musician of high moral sensibilities living in Hungary. No other musician of our century has faced its horrors quite so frankly. . . . It is this intense purity of feeling that gives [these works] warmth and makes their often rude and certainly deliberate discordance of sound acceptable to so many music lovers of otherwise conservative tastes. Nobody, as we know, ever minds expressive discord. The "modern music" war was a contest over the right to enjoy discord for its

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[2]Ibid., P. 197.

> own sake, for its spicy tang. . . . Bartok himself, as a young man, was a spice lover but not at all an upsetter [of the apple cart]. He was a consolidator of advance rather than a pioneer. As a mature composer he came to lose his taste for paprika but not for humanity. His music approached more and more a state of systematic discord, rendered more and more truly and convincingly the state of European man in his time. His six string quartets are . . . the essence of his deepest thought and feeling, his most powerful and humane communcation. They are also, in a century that has produced richly in that medium, a handfull of chamber music nuggets that are pure gold by any standards.[3]

The extent of Thomson's reviews and essays as a leader of discussion and as a watchdog of our musical culture can be evidenced in the range of his topics. Those written for the intellectual reader included, "Expressive Content;" "Ethical Content;" "Intellectual Content;" "Surrealism and Music."[4] Some reviews advocating modern music were, "Real Modern Music;" "Understanding Modern Music;" "Reviewing Modern Music;"[5] and "Schuman's Undertow" (William Schuman).[6] His essays on the Russian musical scene informed the readers of the censorships of certain works by the Russians, Prokofiev and Schostakovitch. Other columns of political interest came from his overseas trips alerting the public

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[3]Hoover and Cage, Virgil Thomson . . ., pp. 94-95.

[4]Thomson, The Art of Judging Music, respectively, pp. 295, 301, 298, 289.

[5]Thomson, The Musical Scene, respectively, pp. 113, 280, 284.

[6]Thomson, The Art . . ., p. 157.

to the state of music in Europe, "Musical Belgium," "Germany's Musical Life," "State and Private Radio."[7]

Thomson did not always let sleeping dogs lie and his criticism was not always favorable. When he had something bad to say, he said it. Consequently, in this example from a critique of Dorothy Maynor's accompanist, he opined,

> Miss Maynor's lack of essential rhythm was in no way helped out last night by the sort of spineless, though utterly high-class accompaniments Mr. Sander provided. In the best boned-mackerel tradition, he obfuscated all the rhythmic and dynamic values of the piano parts in such a way that they offered only a tonal support to the singer, putting squarely on her shoulders the burden of the music's whole dynamic and rhythmic line.[8]

Virgil Thomson often criticized vocalists for not enunciating their own English language and blamed the teachers for instructing their students in too many foreign languages without mastering any. His point was that a vocalist could not sing musically a language he did not understand. Why sing three or four languages poorly when one could sing one or two well? Of course, the critic did not stop with the teachers. He included many a Met singer, as well as the Board of Directors, the concert managers and the conductor.

The newspaper man reviewed numerous orchestral concerts, ballets, recitals, festivals and sometimes school and

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[7]Ibid., respectively, pp. 238, 250, 234.

[8]Thomson, "Ambitious Vocalism," Oct. 24, 1940, review in NYHT.

university curricula. Thomson spoke out as a critic for and against them all. When he did not think the programs were serving the public's musical needs, he spoke regardless of how big or small the party involved was. The critic titled a review of a Vladimir Horowitz recital in Carnegie Hall, "Master of Distortion and Exaggeration"[9] and then said,

> His Chopin varied a good deal during the evening. The Sonata [in B^b minor] was violent, coarsely conceived, melodramatic. He made the Funeral March sound like a Russian boat-song by accenting all the off-beats of the bass. . .

Thomson interjected comments on other pianists,

> Paderewski had and Artur Rubinstein had a strength of crescendo comparable. Schmitz has an equal cleanness of articulation and a more even trill. Lhevinne's octaves and general marksmanship are far from despicable by comparison. And almost any of the more poetic virtuosos, Serkin or Casadesus, for example, has a lovelier tone. But none of these pianists is so free from respect for the composer's intentions, as these are currently understood. Horowitz pays no attention to such academic considerations. He is out to wow the public, and wow it he does.

No musical dragons escaped the man's watchguard scrutiny. One may still not agree with his opinions today, but they were stated in clear English.

Several times a year Thomson devoted a column to reviewing books of a musical nature, as suggestive reading

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[9]Thomson, op. cit., March 7, 1942, in The Musical Scene, pp. 188-9.

materials for his audience. In one such review,[10] discussing the distribution of cultural music in America through performance, from the source Worlds of Music by Cecil Smith, published in 1952, Virgil Thomson's opinion on management was summarized. Thomson informed the reader,

> Two years ago I devoted this column of five Sundays to a brief recital of woes and wailings received at my desk in the form of letters from recitalists and from the regional collaborators of the New York-centered chains. Mr. Smith reviews extensively the controversy of which my articles were a part . . . He corrects me on several matters of fact . . ., he arrives at least partial agreement with my own far less detailed findings.

Mr. Smith quotes the chairman of the Board of Columbia Artists as saying: "What is Mr. Thomson trying to do with music--find a cure for it?"

The chairman felt that music did not belong to any one set of people and that the people were the final judges. Mr. Smith, in turn defended Thomson's stand by saying that if what the chair believed was true, then the public need not accept any responsibility to impose public taste.

> In the face of this attitude, nobody who believes in the intellectual values of music and the desirability of opening these values to the wide public can hesitate to join in Thomson's question, "Is musical management living up to its obligations?"

---

[10]Thomson, "Inside Music Realistically Pictured and Fairly Judged by Cecil Smith," Jan. 11, 1953, review in NYHT.

Smith continued, the public was not living up to its obligations, artists were bound to programs chosen by corporations (management) without much input. He stated further that corporations maintained, "almost a life-and-death power over [artist's] careers, as Thomson in this instance, quite correctly says."

Among other comments the critic made against management, one from an essay of April 9, 1944, "What's Wrong With the Met?" follows:

> . . .essentially the Metropolitan hasn't changed much. Its policies and administration have long seemed to him [Virgil Thomson] a muddle; and a muddle they remain, in spite of good shows now and then.
>
> If the Metropolitan performances were not so unpredictable and so varied in quality there would be no reason for a music critic to comment on the organization that produces them. But being as they are--sublime, ridiculous, and everything in between--and being also the visible reason for existence of a corporation that raises money by public passing of the hat and that is recognized by the state as a cultural utility, they make one wonder willy-nilly whether we, the public, are getting all we are entitled to out of our contributions. . . . It is [Thomson's argument] based on the simple fact, clearly visible to any regular patron, that the quality of the performances is undependable. Now, a business that puts out an undependable product is not a sound business. . . . It is their business to establish real intellectual and artistic standards and to maintain them.

Or from a review of April 4, 1948, headed "Managerial Stars," Thomson talked of a manager's dream as being a music world without criticism. The critic countered an attack by a manager that felt a professional musician should not be hired as a critic due to the possibility of the one merely

being a frustrated or unsuccessful musician perhaps seeking recrimination. Thomson replied in that case, "could managements hire them as advisors?" Thus the critic disqualified the credentials of the attacker.

Previously mentioned was the reviewer's advocacy of better programming. Thomson often admonished the east coast for withholding new music. In "Stravinsky's Symphony," a review of a performance by Leopold Stokowski and the NBC Symphony Orchestra, February 28, 1943, the music informer wrote that the piece had been in existence for two years or more, having been a commissioned work for the Chicago Orchestra's fiftieth anniversary. Although the composition had been played in several western cities, the local conductors turned it down as being too weak a piece. In return the directors had played lesser-known composers whose works were actually weaker. Thomson stated,

> It is difficult to understand on what grounds the Eastern conductors have neglected an obviously well-written work in a large form by a composer of such high repute. Their private reserves about its spiritual or aesthetic value would seem to me interesting as opinion but hardly valid as a reason for refusing to expose it to general judgment.

A March 26, 1950 review "Texas's Major Orchestras" described not only the situation of the orgnizations for the East coast readers, but also commented on their programming, "All the Texas Orchestras play a good deal of American music and encourage Texas composers." A September 3, 1950, criticism, "Protests about Programs" featured reader's

comments and complaints on programming. It proved that Thomson's views were not stemmed from a passing psychological state, that many in his musical audience shared his beliefs and supported his causes. The remarks also showed many supported some of his causes but not all of them. One woman wrote of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra concerts, "As far as I am concerned, and I know I speak for many of my fellow-subscribers, one more season of inferior programs of this one will be my last." This woman agreed with the critic on better programming, but she was opposed to too much contemporary music without a balance of his "fifty pieces."

Thus, the boundaries of Virgil Thomson's music criticism left no stone unturned among the musical bastions of our society. His reviews alerted the public to the new and novel, informed his readers of compositional flaws and strengths, supplied historical tidbits and rendered insights into a composer's world. Thomson supported music advocates that had earned a high degree of professionalism, and, most importantly encouraged his readers to think of the views of a working man from Missouri.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Virgil Thomson set a pattern for writing important to the history of American criticism. American readers were ready for music criticism and American music when Virgil Thomson was reviewing. Thomson the composer and Thomson the critic promulgated one and the same meaning. There was no duality of purpose in the aim of each role. Both careers advocated the establishment and advancement of an American musical culture. Through his music criticism the man battled for a broader intellectual musical existence that might elevate the area to a different plane. With his strong desire to promote musical tastes, he established the arena of aesthetic controversy which in turn tendered the climate for art. Thomson not only reported or criticised performances, he was actively involved in disseminating information.

In order to stimulate the mind of the public and other reviewers, he founded The Music Critic's Circle of New York in 1941. (The organization makes a yearly award in music criticism for excellence.)

Through his endeavors many performances of new trends in music were brought to the public's attention, e.g., "Serenade Concerts" held at the Museum of Modern Art which

were neo-romantic in nature. Thomson was actively involved in promoting the subject of music criticism by teaching courses at New York University and presenting lectures at universities and festivals through-out North America and Europe (Italian Festival of Modern Music held in Rome, April 4-15, 1954--Thomson lectured on "The Composer & Critic.")

Generally, his schedule on the New York Herald-Tribune consisted of writing two reviews and a Sunday essay weekly for seven months of the year. This schedule enabled him to explore other areas and to compose. To date, as a critic and as a composer, Thomson's creative output consists of operas, ballets, orchestral works, concertos, works for voices and orchestra, choral works, songs, film music, piano music, incidental music for theater, books on music, countless reviews and essays, and an auto-biography.

The art of music criticism has gained acceptance on a broad scale including the offering of courses and degrees in Criticism in universities. For example, the University of Florida offers an M.F.A. program in History, Literature and Citicism; and McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, advertises a Master of Arts in Music Criticism.

As Roger Sessions said in his essay "Scope of Music Criticism" from the Harvard Symposium, "[the] work of [the] critic [is] never complete, and his judgment never definitive." The review once written, however, is permanent. It is hoped that the endeavor once entered into, followed the

precedent which Thomson invoked as the principal for his column, "intellectual distinction itself is news"[1] and that it be written in understandable English. This principle was stipulated by both Thomson and the New York Herald-Tribune.

In conclusion, if we assume the survival of culture, then we must also assume that cultural values will survive. Genuine quality in art will continue to prevail along with those qualities we value, such as, imagination, invention, and the basic balance of intensity and lucid expression, which, in itself signified the ultimate of our inner and outer mastery of that art. With these qualities prevailing it is likewise only natural to assume that certain standards are to be maintained and cultivated through criticism. Regardless of the critical climate, it is assured that art will continue and that the genuine qualities of criticism will make contributions, directly or indirectly, and influence the growth and survival of the arts. The music criticism of Virgil Thomson touched deeply the qualities we share and, therefore, should not be neglected in a study of Western music.

Virgil Thomson's music criticism will live on.

---

[1]Thomson, . . . Thomson, p. 328.

APPENDIX

LIST OF WORKS BY VIRGIL THOMSON

Ballets and Operas

Four Saints in Three Acts (opera, Stein) 1927-28 orchd. 1933 first performed 1934

Filling Station (ballet, Christensen) 1937

The Mother of US All (opera, Stein) 1947

The Harvest According (ballet, deMille) 1952

Lord Byron (opera, J. Larson) 1961-8 first performed 1972

Band and Orchestral

2 Sentimental Tangos 1923

Symphony on a Hymn Tune 1928

Symphony No. 2 1931, rev. 1941

The Plow that Broke the Plains 1936

Filling Station Suite 1937

The River Suite 1937

Fugue and Chorale on Yankee Doodle 1945

The Seine at Night 1947

Acadian Songs & Dances 1948

Louisiana Story 1948

At the Beach 1949

A Solemn Music 1949

Mother of us All Suite 1949

Sea Piece with Birds 1952

Choral Preludes [arr. from Brahms] 1956

The Lively Arts Fugue 1957

Fugues and Cantilenas 1959

A Joyful Fugue 1962

Autumn 1964

Ode to the Wonders of Nature 1965

Fantasy and Homage to an Earlier England 1966

Symphony No. 3 orch. from String Quartet No. 2 1972

Pilgrims and Pioneers (arr. from film score] 1966

Musical Portraits: (Instrumental only)

Meditation (Jere Abbott) 1935 orchd. 1944

The John Mosher Waltzes 1935

Barcarolle for Woodwinds (Georges Hugnet) 1940 orchd. 1944

Bugles and Birds (Pablo Picasso) 1940 orchd. 1944

Cantabile for Strings (Nicolas de Chatelain) 1940 orchd. 1944

Fugue (Alexander Smallens) 1940 orchd. 1944

Fanfare for France (Max Kahn) 1940 orchd. 1944

Tango Lullaby (Flavie Alvarez de Toledo) 1940 orchd. 1944

Metropolitan Museum Fanfare: Portrait of an Amer. Artist (Florine Stettheimer) 1941 orchd. 1970

Precussion Piece (Jesse K. Lasell) 1941 orchd. 1944

Study Piece (Louise Craine) 1941 orchd. 1969

Canons for Dorothy Thompson 1942

Pastorale (Aaron Copland) 1942 orchd. 1945

The Mayor LaGuardia Waltzes 1942

Edges (Robert Indiana) 1966 orchd. 1969

Chamber and Instrumental

Sonata de Chiesa (clarinet, horn, trpt. trbn, vn) 1926

4 Portraits, (1928) various instrumentation

Le Bains-bar. violin, pf, 1929 arr. as trmpt as At the Beach 1948

Portraits, (1929) various instrumentation

Portraits, (1930) various instrumentation

Sonata for violin & piano 1930

Serenade (flute & violin) 1931

2 string quartets 1931, 1932

Sonata for flute 1943

Lamentations (accordian) 1959

Etude (violin, cello and piano) 1966

Family Portrait (brass quintet) 1972

Parson Weems and the Cherry Tree Etc. 1975

Piano:

Synthetic Waltzes 2 pf, 1925

10 Easy Pieces and a Coda 1926

5 Inventions 1926

32 Portraits (4 vols., 1929-45)

4 Sonatas 1929, 1929, 1930, 1940

9 Etudes 1940, 1951

10 Etudes 1943

Portrait of Willy Eisenhart 1972

Organ:

Fanfare 1922

Passacaglia 1922

Pastorale on a Christmas Plainsong 1922

Prelude 1922

Variations and Fugues on Sunday School Tunes 1926

Church Organ Wedding Music 1940

2 pieces 1940

Film Scores:

The Plow that Broke the Plains 1936

The River 1937

The Spanish Earth 1937

Tuesday in November 1945

Lousiana Story 1948 (Pulitzer Prize)

Incidental Music:

Hamlet 1936

Horse Eats Hat 1936

Injunction Granted 1936

Macbeth 1936

Antony and Cleopatra 1937

Power Among Men 1958

The Goddess 1958

Journey to America 1964

Androcles and the Lion 1938

The Trojan Women 1940

Life of a Careful Man 1941

Oedipus tyrannus 1941

King Lear 1952

The Grass Harp 1953

Ondine 1954

King John 1956

Measure for Measure 1956

Much Ado about Nothing 1957

Othello 1957

The Merchant of Venice 1957

Bertha 1959

Choral: (unaccompanied)

De Profundis 1920 rev. 1951

3 Antiphonal Psalms 1922

Tribulations civatatum 1922

Missa Brevis 1924

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need 1937

Scenes from the Holy Infancy According to St. Mathew 1937

3 Hymns from the Old South 1949

4 Songs to Poems of Thomas Campion 1955

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry 1958

5 Auvergnat Folk Songs 1964

(accompanied)

Capital Capitals 1927

7 Choruses form the Medea of Euripedes 1934

Missa Brevis 1937

Missa pro defunctis chorus, 1960

Dance in Praise 1962

The Nativity, as Sung by the Shepherds 1966

Cantata on poems of Edward Lear 1973 rev. 1974

Solo Vocal

(with orchestra): 5 Songs to Poems of William Blake 1951

Collected Poems 1959

Maas 1960

The Feast of Love 1964

Ship Wreck and Love Scene from Byron's Don Juan 1967

(with instruments) Stabat Mater 1931 arr lv. pf, 1960

(with piano) Vernal Equinox 1920

The Sunflower 1920

3 Sentences from the Song of Solomon 1924

The Tiger 1926

Susie Asado 1926

Une melodie dite La valse gregorienne 1927

Preciosilla 1927

Le berceau de Gertrude Stein 1928

Les soirees bagnolaises 1928

Commentaire sur St. Jerome 1928

3 poems de la duchesse de Rohan 1928

Portrait of F.B. 1929

Le singe et le léopard 1930

Air de Phèdre 1930

Film: deux soeurs qui ne sont pas soeurs 1930

Oraison funèbre 1930

Chamber Music 1931

Dirge 1939

The Bugle Songs 1941

4 Songs to Thomas Campion 1951

5 Songs from William Blake 1951

3 Old English Songs 1955

4 Old English Songs 1955

Take, o Take those Lips Away 1956

Pardon, Goddess of the Night 1957

Tell me Where is Fancy Bred 1957

Sigh no More Ladies 1957

Was this Fair Face 1957

3 estampas de Ninez 1957

If Thou a Reason Dost Desire to Know 1958

Collected Poems 1959

Mostly About Love 1959

My Shepherd will Supply my Need 1959

5 Praises and Prayers 1963

Two by Marianne Moore 1963

From "Sneden's Landing Variations" 1972

The Courtship of the Yongly-bongly-bo 1973-4

Principle Publishers: Boosey & Hawkes, Colombo, Fischer, Gray, MCA, Presser, G. Schirmer, Southern, Weintraub.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leslie Cheryl Dack was born on Friday, May 16, 1952, in Louisville, Kentucky. She was raised in South Florida and attended the local schools. In 1970 she entered the University of Florida (for the first time) to receive a Bachelor of Music Education degree. After teaching as a high school band and choral director, she returned to the University to work on a Master of Fine Arts degree in music. It is that directive which has resulted in this biographical sketch.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

David J. Kushner, Chairman
Professor of Music

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

John S. Kitts
Professor of Music

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

S. P. Kniseley
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This thesis was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Fine Arts and to the Graduate Council, and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

August 1981

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